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RESEARCH DEVELOPMENTS

ISSN 1442-6625

No. 12 Summer 2004

Where to now for early childhood education and care?

Why parents choose public
or private schools

Evaluation of school-based
arts education programs
in Australian schools

Reading for pleasure and
literacy achievement

Australian Council for Educational Research

ACER

Early Childhood



Professor Geoff Masters
Chief Executive Officer

Research continues to reveal the astounding growth and development that occur in the first few years of life. It is during these early years that the foundations and directions are set for children's future learning. By the time they enter primary school, young children are at widely differing levels of cognitive, linguistic, social and psychomotor development. Study after study shows that many children who are behind at the start of school fall further behind with each additional year of school.

Given the importance of the preschool years to children's learning success, it is surprising that there is no national policy or vision for early childhood education in Australia. There are no explicit expectations for children's progress from birth to 5 years, no agreement on universal entitlements to early childhood education and care, no consensus on how to optimise children's early learning experiences, and no basis for monitoring the outcomes and effectiveness of the myriad of Australian early childhood arrangements.

In her article for this issue of *Research Developments*, Dr Alison Elliott calls for a national, independent review of early childhood services. Fundamental to the provision of a coherent program of early learning will be the dismantling of the current division between child 'care' arrangements and early 'education' delivered in preschools and kindergartens. Dr Elliott also calls for greater national agreement on the qualifications of staff responsible for the development, education and care of children below school age.

While debate rages around issues of funding and public and private provision in school education (see Adrian Beavis's article in this issue), parents of pre-school children are confronted with a bewildering array of government, commercial and voluntary providers. While some child care centres provide strong early childhood education programs with qualified early childhood teachers, many do not. These are significant challenges for the education community.

Thank you to readers who responded to our survey in the last edition of *Research Developments*. More than 150 responses were received including one all the way from Iran. We were encouraged that most readers found the new format attractive and easy to read and the contents informative. Many readers also identified research that they would like to see featured in upcoming issues. Your feedback is appreciated.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Geoff Masters". The signature is stylized and fluid.

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Research Developments is published by
Australian Council for Educational Research
19 Prospect Hill Road
Camberwell VIC 3124
Phone: (03) 9277 5500
Email: communications@acer.edu.au
Website: www.acer.edu.au

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Research 2004
Printed November 2004

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Editor: Louise Reynolds
Design: Integral
Printed by: Camten Graphics

Print Post Approved PP328727/00028
ISSN 1442-6625
ABN 19 004 398 145

Why parents choose public or private schools





By Dr Adrian Beavis

Adrian is a Principal Research Fellow with ACER's Teaching and Learning research program

*Assumptions have often been made about what parents are looking for in the school they select for their children but there has been little evidence to support these assumptions. An ACER study for The Sydney Morning Herald looked into the reasons behind the drift away from public schools in Australia and asked what do parents really think of our schools? **Adrian Beavis**, the report's author, discusses its findings.*

In January this year Prime Minister John Howard prompted considerable debate on the subject of school selection when he suggested that more parents were opting for private education because they feel that 'government schools have become too politically correct and values-neutral'.¹ His comments sparked strong reactions and many opinions but to date there has been little real evidence to show what really does influence parents when choosing a school. What we do know is that parents have been voting with their feet over the past decade. Between 1993 and 2003, Government school enrolments in Australia increased by 1.2 per cent while enrolments in non-Government schools increased by 22.3 per cent.

There has clearly been a drift away from public school education but what has caused this drift? What do parents really think of Australia's schools? Do more parents of public school children aspire to join this drift to the independents? A search for answers to these and other questions prompted a study conducted by ACER and ACNielsen into parental attitudes to private and public schools.



The study's design

The study, commissioned by Fairfax for *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* newspapers, was designed to explore the reasons behind the growth in the proportion of students in private schools compared to Government schools over the past decade. The findings from the report, *Why parents choose public or private schools*, were featured in the 'Great Schools Debate' series in *The Sydney Morning Herald* from 9-13 August.

The study was designed to address three major questions:

1. What are the family background factors that influence selection of a private or public school?
2. What are the economic factors that influence selection of a private or public school?
3. What are the perceptions of schools that parents have that may shape their selection of private or public schools?

ACNielsen collected data from 609 households on family background, parents' perceptions of the school sectors and what factors most influence their decision in choosing a school.

Key findings

Among the findings on family background was that family occupational status is associated with the selection of a private or public school, with those having high occupational status more likely to choose a private school compared with those with lower levels of occupational status. Around half of families at Government and Catholic schools have middle levels of occupational status compared with around 40 per cent for those at Independent schools.

Conversely, families with students at an Independent school more commonly have higher occupational status – around 50 per cent compared to 25 to 30 per cent of families from Government or Catholic schools.

Educational level of parents also affects the decision to select a private or public school, with those having the highest level of education selecting a private school for their children. About 20 per cent of families at Government and Catholic schools have both parents with a degree compared with just on 25 per cent of families at Independent schools.

Political preference may also be associated with school selection. Labor voters are more likely to select Government schools and Liberal/National party voters are more likely to select Independent schools.

Data were gathered on the economic factors that may influence school selection based on household income. Those with higher family incomes were more likely to send their children to a private school. The proportion of families with an annual income of \$ 100 000 or more makes up 40 per cent of the families in Independent schools compared with 21.6 per cent of Catholic school families and 11 per cent of Government school families. Of all families in Government schools, just over 20 per cent have an income less than \$ 25 000 compared with 5 per cent in Independent schools.

Parents of government school students were also asked hypothetically if they would move their child to a private school if money were no object. Just over half of parents (54 per cent) answered that they would not move their children to a private school. Conversely, approximately a third of public

school parents (34 per cent) said they would change to a private school if the fees were no more than for government schools, suggesting that if private education were more affordable the drift away from government schools would continue.

The reasons given by parents who would stay with the public system relate to their experience of the quality of education offered by these schools, or a belief in the quality of education that they provide. Other reasons included support of the Government school concept, a dislike of religious aspects of private schools and a view of private schools as elitist.

The most common reasons given for changing from a Government school included the view that there is better discipline in private schools, the view that there is better education or better teachers (paid more or properly screened) in private schools, the view that there are smaller classes or there is more individual attention given to students in private schools. There was also some evidence of religious views influencing these opinions with 8.5 per cent of parents mentioning the religious or value systems of private schools.

Factors influencing school selection

Aspects of schools that were important to parents in the selection of a public or private school were also examined. A clear link was found between what parents perceive to be important and the selection of a school sector.

The strongest effect on the selection of a private school was the importance parents attached to the perception of the school having traditional values. The wearing of a school uniform and the traditions of the school are also important.

For parents with students in a Catholic school, discipline, the religious values of the school, the traditions of the school and the requirement of wearing a school uniform were considered important. Selection of a Government school was influenced most by parents' perceptions of the importance of academic and social and cultural security or familiarity with the school. The range of subjects available and the location of the school were also important. School uniform, tradition of the school and religious or moral values of the school were considered less important.

Conclusions

In so far as this research was able to pin down reasons for the selection of a private or public school, one factor stood out: the extent to which the school embraced traditional values to do with discipline, religious or moral values, the traditions of the school itself, and the requirement that a uniform be worn.

An interesting question raised by this survey is to what extent do parental perceptions mirror reality in schools? Does a school's connection to a church make it more likely that students will develop personal ethical standards and moral codes of behaviour? Or does the fact that government schools are more representative of local communities mean that students in those schools are more likely to value inclusiveness and to be supportive of others, including minorities and disadvantaged groups? We don't know from this study how parents view values or how these values should be treated in schools. An exploration of parental views of values in schools may be an appropriate topic for future research.

The perception that some schools provide a 'better education' than others is also

difficult to validate. While it is true that some schools achieve outstanding Year 12 results and are highly successful in terms of university entrance, some of these schools – both public and private – have selective student intakes. Some schools draw students from higher socio-economic groups within the community and have above-average levels of support at home and outside school.

An important conclusion of this national parent survey is that parents now seek a high level of involvement in choosing a secondary school for their children. If parents are to make informed choices between schools, they probably require better evidence than is currently available to them.

The study identified a number of differences between parents who send their children to government and non-government schools. There were also things that parents in the different school sectors had in common. For nearly all parents in this study, the selection of a school for their children was important. Most reported high levels of satisfaction with the school they had selected, and had high expectations that their children would successfully complete their schooling at Year 12. In other words, most parents have a positive view of Australian schools. ■

For further information.

The full report *Why parents choose private or public schools* by Dr Adrian Beavis can be read on *The Sydney Morning Herald* website www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/08/17/1092508439581.html

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1. Maiden, Samantha, 'Howard slams public schools', *The Australian*, 20 January 2004, page 1
- see also Riley, Mark: Doherty, Linda and Burke, Kelly, 'Backlash over PM's attack on public schools', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 January 2004, page 1

Where to
childhood



now for early education and care?



By Dr Alison Elliott

Alison is the Research Director of ACER's Early Childhood Education research program.

Early childhood education and care has been a rapidly growing part of Australian education for over twenty years and now caters for more than half a million Australian children. Yet there is little consistency and continuity between learning programs, no agreed or desirable learning outcomes and large numbers of unqualified or minimally qualified staff.

Alison Elliott examines the issues.

Australia's early childhood sector caters for well over half a million 0-5 year-olds in a myriad of services that are legislated and funded by a complex network of agencies and organisations, and operated and administered by a range of government, community and private for profit operators.

About three quarters of children aged 3 to 4 years used some type of formal child care in 2002, including home-based Family Day Care. Yet, little is known about how children fare. There are no agreed standards and learning programs across services, no agreed positions on staffing and staff qualifications, and no strategies for mapping, tracking or comparing children's experiences and outcomes. In short, there is little monitoring of children's progress and little investment in research and development.

There are two main early childhood service types – child care and sessional preschools and kindergartens. Child care is divided into centre-based Long Day Care and home-based Family Day Care. Both operate on a long day basis. Preschools (also called kindergartens in some states) provide early educational experiences during typical school hours, often on a half-day basis. Other early childhood services under the early childhood services umbrella include Play Groups, Occasional Care, Early Intervention Programs and Registered Carers. Sometimes the first two to three years of primary school for children aged 5 to 8 years are included within the broad ‘early childhood’ sweep.

Most early childhood sector growth has been in provision of child care programs for young children while parents work. But in the scramble to provide affordable child care for working families, and without a national policy and vision for early childhood education, the once strong focus on early learning and education has slipped into the background.

There is growing anecdotal evidence of a widening ‘care’ – ‘education’ divide in early childhood services that is being supported and sustained by differential funding and resourcing. Closing it will be difficult unless there is a rethinking of early childhood policy and a commitment to funding services and supporting families, rather than the market driven approach that currently prevails. Further, despite widespread recognition that early years experiences have a major impact on longer term educational and social outcomes, many children miss out altogether. There is no universal entitlement to, or provision for, early childhood education and care. A national, independent review of early childhood services is long overdue.

In the early 1990s, concerns about quality within the rapidly increasing child care

centres resulted in the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS) administered by the National Child Care Accreditation Council. While QIAS has ensured more consistent quality across child care centres, it does not focus on children’s outcomes or on monitoring and guiding their growth and progress across learning and developmental areas.

The lack of inter-service and inter-professional agreement and explicitness on what is valued and how to monitor learning and educational progress makes it difficult to assess the extent to which early childhood services are impacting on children’s development or predicting successful adjustment to school. It’s also difficult to make comparisons across services. Is it reasonable to compare the learning progress and outcomes of a four-year-old child in child care, Family Day Care or preschool when goals, purposes and programs are so different both within and across service types?

Creating and sustaining quality early childhood services

Ideally, early childhood services should provide a comprehensive education and care program for children in the 0-5 age group. Unfortunately they often don’t. While the literature is clear about the close connections between care, development and education, Australia’s separate histories and traditions of early childhood ‘care’ programs and ‘education’ programs have resulted in clear policy, funding and administrative divisions. The result is a twin system of early childhood services – child care and preschools, supported by separate funding and legislative arrangements.

The different Commonwealth and state-based funding, administrative and legislative requirements have resulted in complex layers and connections between government, voluntary groups, the public

education systems, independent schools, community organisations, and free market forces, small business owner-operators and major commercial ventures. So complex is the early childhood landscape, that most people, including families seeking early childhood education and care, have difficulty understanding and negotiating the maze.

Discussions and debate about early childhood education and care are most often concerned with supply, demand and affordability, as evidenced in the 2004 Australian Federal election campaign. Clearly, these are important issues. There is a well documented shortage of child care places, particularly for children under two years. There is a ‘crisis’ in staffing, with shortages, low salaries and poor working conditions. Child care is an increasingly unattractive employment option. Child care and preschool affordability are constant problems for families. Fees in most of the more than 4000 child care centres and many preschools and kindergartens rival those of Australia’s 67 ‘elite’ independent schools.

Contrary to much public perception, early childhood care and education is not ‘government provided’. Nationally, most preschools and child care centres are private and independently operated, although often on a not-for-profit basis. Most families pay fees for their children to attend preschool or child care. Fortunately, many families using child care centres and Family Day Care are eligible for a Commonwealth-funded, means tested fee subsidy called the *Child Care Benefit*. But it does not apply to the more than 200 000 children who attend preschools and kindergartens. Some state and local government bodies also provide means-tested fee subsidies for families using community preschool services. Preschools run by public school systems are usually free.



Typically, preschool education is provided for only a few hours a week, and usually just for four-year-olds. Clearly, this limited availability presents logistical problems for working families who need care and education services during working hours. Many families must use several early childhood service types to accommodate children's care and education needs.

The biggest growth in the past two decades has been in the child care sector. Australia now has some 4338 child care centres, an increase of 142 per cent from 1991. Almost all are privately operated, either by not-for-profit groups or by commercial businesses. Most (approximately 72 per cent) are private for profit ventures and the proportion is growing. The growth in child care and especially the private for profit sector, has increased the importance of commercial proprietors, including the

'child care chains' that can operate hundreds of centres. To their credit, commercial operators have stepped in to meet demand for child care where governments have failed. Indeed, much of the pressure to provide places to meet families' child care needs has been offset by growth in private for profit centres and in the low cost, home-based Family Day Care.

Australian Bureau of Statistics data indicate that approximately 83 per cent of four-year-olds and 63 per cent of three-year-olds participate in some sort of 'formal child care', but not necessarily in a centre-based early learning and development program. For many, 'formal' means home-based care. In fact, only just over half of four-year-old children attend an 'educational' preschool or kindergarten program. While some child care centres provide strong early childhood education programs with qualified early childhood teachers, many don't.

The net result is that many young children miss out on early childhood education experiences and others have only limited participation opportunities.

A vision and direction for early childhood education?

It is against this complex backdrop that early childhood services directions, visions and policy must be considered. Contemporary research shows children's development is dependent on environmental quality, including the quality of early care and education settings. There is widespread evidence of the importance of the early years to later social and academic competence and agreement about the need to raise the overall quality of early childhood experiences, including the transition-to-school phase. But despite knowledge of the positive influence of early childhood education on school progression and educational outcomes, there is no agreement on how to optimise early learning experiences for all children.

Although Australian research on early childhood care and education outcomes is limited, international research and research in school-based educational settings show that rich, well planned learning experiences impact positively on children's social and cognitive outcomes. They help close the traditional school 'achievement gap' between children from lower income groups and those from middle and upper income family backgrounds.

Importantly, issues relating to quality and effectiveness of early childhood services must be addressed as part of a coherent early childhood services vision and framework. Fundamental to the issue of quality and outcomes for young children is dismantling the 'care' – 'education' divide to create more seamless, early childhood learning programs for all children. Unfortunately, the 1980s vision of holistic, integrated children's services, offering strong care and education programs has long faded. As new long day care services evolved, few were able or willing to provide a comprehensive and seamless education and care program for children in the 0-5 age group. The cost of qualified early childhood staff was just too high.

Rather, what has emerged is two largely separate systems. Child 'care', delivered in child care centres and home based settings (Family Day Care) and early 'education', delivered in preschools and kindergartens run by community organisations and by public and independent schools.

The different levels and types of staffing in child care and preschools and kindergartens illustrate the divisions most vividly. Most preschools and kindergartens have qualified early childhood teachers, but only about 8 per cent of staff in child care centres have an early childhood degree level qualification. There is no national agreement on the appropriate qualifications



for staff responsible for the development, education and care of children below school age.

It is the twin systems of child care and preschool education, and the associated issues of differential quality and outcomes for children, that are looming as the biggest policy challenge facing the early childhood field and the wider community. Our early childhood programs must *both* optimise early learning *and* development and provide care during parents' working hours.

The quality and outcomes agenda

The wider quality and effectiveness movement in education has identified practitioner knowledge and skill, reflection and advocacy, interactions with children and professional development, together with vision, dedication and adaptability as key factors in optimising learning progress and outcomes.

Commonsense, plus evidence from the school sector, and from a growing body of early childhood research, suggests that more skilled practitioners are better able to engage with children and optimise developmental outcomes. But, there is little evidence on factors influencing Australian children's quality of experiences and their learning outcomes in early childhood settings. Even with the national Quality Improvement and Accreditation System in child care centres, little is known about how staff meet explicit and implicit demands of the quality principles, how the principles are interpreted, or about children's early care and education experiences and their impact on development and learning. Even less is known about children's progress in preschools or in Family Day Care. Other than in South Australia, there is no mandated curriculum framework to guide educators, and there are no programs to monitor or assess progress and outcomes for children.

The international evidence on practitioner competence in early childhood points to the importance of quality pedagogies for children's success. As in the school sector, teachers' knowledge and understanding of learning and development, their interactions with children, and their modelling, scaffolding, and questioning techniques seem to be key factors influencing developmental outcomes.

That pedagogic quality is emerging as important in early childhood settings is not surprising given research in the school sector highlighting the strong association between good teaching and student achievement. Ingvarson (2002) says that the message from this research is clear. Policy makers must invest *first and most* in teacher quality. The same is almost certainly true in the early childhood services sector but needs to be explored.

Where to now?

On the surface, Australia seems to have a sound system of early childhood education and care, but a closer look shows that equity of access, experience and outcome for young children is a long way off.

We might wonder why issues of government funding, equity of access, quality and outcomes, accountability, teacher quality and effectiveness, and the shift to 'private' education, so contentious in the schooling sector, raise barely a whisper when applied to children five and under? The increasing monopoly of not just 'private' and not-for-profit, but commercial and for-profit early childhood centres, has been all but ignored in the public debates about education funding.

There is an urgent need for a review of early childhood care and education. We need to create a national vision and action plan. We need to decide whether we want a universal entitlement to quality early childhood education and care

independent of families' ability to pay.

The current 'care' – 'education' divide must be closed. We need to create more holistic, integrated early education and care services for children, and seriously consider accessibility, affordability and quality. Unless action is taken now, the twin system of care and education will be set in concrete. More affluent families will avoid child care altogether. Families eligible for the *Child Care Benefit* will cluster in services where fees, and hence quality, are kept low to maximise affordability. Services and quality will be further tied to family socio-economic status and ability to pay.

Today, there is widespread recognition of the longer term educational and social outcomes of early childhood education, but we have little idea about the extent to which child care centres, preschools, and Family Day Care afford rich early developmental opportunities and promote sound learning outcomes. We don't have a mechanism to monitor, assess and compare children's progress, or to evaluate the outcomes of the many different types of early childhood programs. We're not even sure how early childhood programs should look, how curriculum should be structured, what values, learning experiences and outcomes could and should be expected and what staffing standards are most likely to ensure optimum outcomes for children. There is an urgent need for a review of early childhood service provision and outcomes, and future policy development needs to be informed by good evidence. To close the school achievement gap, we need to be much clearer about what works in early childhood, under what conditions and for what children. ■

For a full list of references for this article and suggested further reading, see the online version of *Research Developments* at www.acer.edu.au



Educational Researchers Australia database

ACER recently launched the Educational Researchers Australia database, the latest interactive database developed by Cunningham Library.

Educational Researchers Australia is a new portal of information for and about educational researchers. It contains information about researchers as well as details of their research interests, publications and projects.

Cunningham Library manager Ms Margaret Findlay hopes the database will provide a comprehensive guide to researchers.

'Users can locate researchers working in specific areas of educational research and/or by geographical locations,' she said. 'The user can search the database by researcher name, institution, country and state, as well as research interest areas. The database also provides details of academic qualifications and contact details.'

The database was developed by Cunningham Library following a request from ACER's senior researchers to develop a database that would allow researchers around Australia, and possibly overseas, to enter their details, interest areas, recent research projects, publications and conference presentations.

The database was thoroughly trialled and tested by ACER researchers before being launched on the ACER website in September.

All educational researchers are encouraged to enter data on their own research into *Educational Researchers Australia*. There is no charge for doing so. Information can be entered and updated through the password controlled edit screens.

Researchers can include links to their own web sites, online publications and conference proceedings and may nominate up to 10 'areas of interest' when inputting their data.

Cunningham Library staff will moderate the database, which is now live on the ACER website at

www.acer.edu.au/library/EducationResearchersAustraliaDatabase.html

Educational Researchers Australia is the latest in a number of databases developed by Cunningham Library that are available online. Other databases include

EdResearch Online – a database containing full text web documents and articles on Australian education. It is updated each month with new records.

Australian Education Directory – an up-to-date directory of organisations and personnel in Australian education. It is available online by subscription.

Education Research Theses – a subscription database of higher degree education theses accepted at Australian universities and colleges, containing over 10 200 records for theses dating from 1919.

Australian Education Index (AEI) – indexes and abstracts documents and articles from print and electronic resources at all areas and levels of education and related fields.

Database of Research on International Education – includes research from Australia and overseas. It was developed under contract for AEI – the Australian Government International Education Network within the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST).

For further information on Cunningham Library databases and other library services, please visit the website at www.acer.edu.au/library/catalogues.html or email the library at library@acer.edu.au

Evaluation of school-based arts



education programs in Australian schools



By Dr Jennifer Bryce

Jennifer is a Research Fellow in ACER's Assessment and Reporting research program

*Participation in school-based arts education programs can have a positive impact on students' engagement with learning, according to recent ACER research. However, there was little statistical evidence of improvement in academic progress as a result of participation in arts education. **Jennifer Bryce** reports on the study.*

Anecdotal evidence from Australian arts programs and overseas studies suggest that exposure to the arts provides positive general learning outcomes, particularly for young people who are Indigenous, in remote or regional communities or from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Four Australian school-based arts programs were evaluated, with a focus on the following questions:

- What is the impact of each arts program on participating students' academic progress, engagement with learning and attendance at school?
- Are empirical or anecdotal examples of improved learning outcomes substantiated?
- What are the attributes of arts programs that are of particular benefit to students?

Four schools were selected for the study because they were seen as examples of good practice that might substantiate claims that exposure to the arts provides positive general learning outcomes. There was a range of ages and a diverse range of backgrounds among the participating students. Data were taken from a range of sources, including administrative records, interviews, observations, questionnaires and tests and other assessments administered as part of the study. The following arts programs were included in the study.

Arts@Direk, South Australia

Direk School is a combined campus across three levels of schooling: preschool, junior primary and primary. There are 650 students from a range of backgrounds, primarily white Anglo Celtic. The school is classified as 'disadvantaged'. The report focuses on a drama mentoring program at Direk Primary School. In addition to drama, the school has a lively arts program with strong participation in the visual arts, music and dance.

Northern Territory Music Programs – Boys' Business Program

Boys' Business is an experimental program based in the Northern Territory that incorporates music as a focus. It is an initiative to encourage male students in the middle primary years, in the first instance, to engage positively with education and life. Students come from diverse backgrounds, including Indigenous and those who have English as a second language. They range from those whose school performance is exemplary, through to students challenged by education and life.

Northern Territory Music Programs – Indigenous Music Education Program

This is a secondary level Indigenous instrumental music delivery program for remote community schools. The main objective of the program is to provide basic literacy and life-skills development through music education.

SCRAYP – (Western Metropolitan Melbourne)

SCRAYP is a youth arts program that aims to engage all young people, particularly high-risk young people, in schools and the wider community. SCRAYP conducts drama programs in primary and secondary schools. Young artists are employed on a casual basis to offer weekly workshops to students in selected schools over two terms. At the end of the program, students in each school present a performance to the local school and community.

Impact of arts programs on learning and attendance

The arts programs investigated enhanced students' potential to engage in learning in the following ways:

- Students' self-esteem is increased, helping them to feel more positive about themselves as learners. The arts programs also often provided students with exposure to positive role models. The contribution of the arts to students' self-esteem was seen to be of particular significance for students from dysfunctional backgrounds and those who suffered from particular disabilities such as attention-deficit disorder and autism.
- Students are better able to work cooperatively with others. This involves working together as a team to mount a production (musical or dramatic), learning that each person (including oneself) is an integral member of the team, and learning various social (emotional control/behaviour management) and communication skills needed to contribute to the team.
- Students learn to plan and set goals, and recognise the need for persistence. Students learned that working hard over a relatively long time can be more rewarding than obtaining immediate results. This was summed up by a Year 4 student who said of drama: 'It was hard but it was fun.'

For students from Indigenous communities, involvement in arts programs led to improved attendance at school (attendance was not seen as an issue at other schools).

None of the studies was able to produce hard evidence that participation in the arts program enhanced academic progress. Although this may be partly due to the short period of investigation, it also reflects the results of other research. System-level results in literacy, numeracy and writing were compared for students involved in two of the programs with students in the same schools who were not involved in the arts programs. In both cases there was no significant difference between performances of the two groups. For assessment of the generic competencies of problem solving, communication, planning and organising and working with others there was a significant difference for one group only. In this one case, the 'arts rich' group scored significantly better than the 'non arts rich group'.

Attributes of arts programs that are of particular benefit to the students

A number of attributes of the programs studied clearly benefited students and encouraged them to learn. It is pertinent to consider the extent to which these attributes may be exclusive to arts programs, and to what extent they might also be present in other programs. It was clear that some students (who would normally be labelled 'low achieving') appreciated the fact that in music programs (*Boys' Business* and *Indigenous Music Education Programme*) they could express themselves without having to read or write. Another important attribute seems to be the voluntary participation of students who can choose to be onlookers.

Transferability of attributes of arts programs to the general curriculum

To what extent can aspects of the arts programs that help students' learning be transferred to the curriculum in general? The Direk drama mentoring provided a model where transfer of 'enabling' skills, attitudes and processes was occurring. This may have been because there was a 'whole school' approach and thus the drama mentoring program was integrated into the school's process of change. Teachers took up ideas that came from the drama mentoring, such as encouraging students to keep learning logs and setting aside class time for students to reflect on their learning.

To what extent are the attributes identified unique to arts programs?

The features that emerged from this study suggest that the arts can provide learning opportunities for students who do not fit the conventional mould of institutional learning. Weak literacy skills can provide a seemingly insurmountable barrier to learning. The arts provide opportunities for students to start to learn and enjoy learning without experiencing the initial discouragement of having to display weak reading and writing skills.

The arts can provide experience of working in a team, an opportunity for reflection and constructive criticism, and helpful ways of expressing and exploring emotions. Arts programs are inclusive – allowing students who have disabilities or who are socially

ostracised to be included, and they can also have a 'levelling' effect – by providing opportunities for students, parents and teachers to work together on an 'equal' level. One does not need to be fully grown or to 'know' a lot to participate in activities.

Further research

There are various directions in which this research could be developed. It would be useful to consider the arts as a vehicle for learning in Indigenous communities.

To what extent can the arts provide a bridge between cultures of learning? It would also be of interest to investigate the necessary conditions for transferring the learning processes in the arts to other areas of the curriculum.

In this study there was an indication that students involved in arts programs scored better in the generic competencies of problem solving, planning, communication and working with others, than students who were not involved in arts programs. It would be useful to look at this phenomenon more intensively, using a larger sample and possibly assessing the 'employability skills', developed by the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Business Council of Australia. The generic competencies assessed for this study happen to be included in the more recently developed 'employability skills'.

It would also be useful to consolidate the present research with a longitudinal study, taking cohorts of students involved in arts programs that can demonstrate positive role models, positive reinforcement of achievements, 'authentic' activities, negotiated procedures and safe environments for risk taking, and track the progress of these students over several years. In particular, school completion, post school study and employment pathways could be noted.

The research was commissioned by the Australian government through the Department of Education, Science and Training, the Australia Council and the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts. ■

The full report can be downloaded from www.dest.gov.au/schools/publications/2004/index.htm

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Reading for pleasure and literacy achievement



By Marion Meiers

Marion is a Senior Research Fellow with ACER's Teaching and Learning research program

Helping children to develop an interest in books and reading can not only be enjoyable for adults and children alike but also have an important positive influence on reading achievement.

Marion Meiers outlines research that emphasises the importance of engagement with reading.

Researchers agree that book reading is a powerful cultural influence in children's literacy development. In the late 1990s, Catherine Snow, an American researcher, chaired a committee established by the US National Academy of Sciences to examine the prevention of reading difficulties in young children.

This committee undertook a synthesis of research on early reading development. It found that evidence of accomplishments related to skilled reading emerges early. Amongst other things, the committee reported that three-year-olds can engage in book-sharing routines with caregivers, comment on characters in books, and listen to stories. Three to four-year-olds, when being read a story, can connect information and events to life experiences, and show an interest in books and reading (Snow, Burns and Griffin. 1998).



Photo: Walter Collato

When adults and very young children share book reading they listen, talk about the story and characters, delight in repeating the words of the text. These interactions are pleasurable and stimulating and enhance language development. Shared book reading can continue to provide pleasure, for both readers and listeners, even when children can read independently. Shared reading is one means of maintaining interest and engagement in reading and further developing reading skills.

Beyond the early years of schooling, engagement in reading continues to play an important part in learning. The 2000 OECD study, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) noted that 'attitudes [to reading] have been shown in many studies to be an important variable in relation to achievement level' (Lokan et al., 2001).

The PISA student survey of 15-year-olds included several items exploring attitudes to reading, finding that engagement in reading has a strong positive relationship with reading achievement. The engagement in reading scale showed the strongest relationship of any scale with reading achievement. The survey also found a strong relationship between reading achievement and interest in reading (Lokan et al., 2001).

These research findings indicate the importance of supporting and maintaining students' interest in reading. Evidence about interest in reading indicates a wide variation amongst teenagers. A recent Australian survey of the reading habits, experiences and attitudes of 10–18 year-olds found that 74 per cent of the age group claimed to 'like reading to some extent' (Australian Centre for Youth Literature, 2001). In PISA, 15-year-old students were asked about the amount of time they spent reading for enjoyment. The finding was that 'a high proportion of students, particularly males, said they did not read for enjoyment. Thirty per cent of students answered that they spent no more than half an hour reading each day'. (Lokan et al., 2001)

Longitudinal research identifies links between literacy and numeracy achievement at school and later experiences. Key findings of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) show that the level of literacy and numeracy achieved by 14-year-olds is a major factor contributing to later

patterns of education and work. An analysis of students leaving school before the beginning of Year 11 using a national representative longitudinal survey of Australian youth who were in Year 9 in 1995 showed that 'students with low levels of school achievement (measured by performance in literacy and numeracy) are substantially more likely to leave school early' (Marks & Fleming, 1999). This research provides further support for efforts to foster reading and engagement with reading, as a central aspect of literacy achievement.

The Australian school curriculum includes a clear focus on the reading of a range of texts, with the underlying purpose of engaging students in reading and reflective discussion. In the Victorian English curriculum, for example, students in Years 9 and 10 are expected to be able to 'read a range of texts and use them to discuss different perspectives on complex themes and issues' (Board of Studies, 2000). Engaging students with reading in this way involves building on the interest that individuals bring to reading, as well as developing engagement, or situational interest in reading in the context of the classroom. Recent work by Harackiewicz (2004) has begun to explore the role of situational interest in promoting academic performance and long-term interest. Harackiewicz (2004) suggests the importance of 'catching' and 'holding' students' interest.

Teachers face the challenge of both catching and sustaining interest, and promoting the learning of students at many different ability levels in the same class. A recent US study over a year of a group of fourth and fifth grade students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in a literature-based program involving reading, writing and talking about books provides one example of evidence of students increasing their participation in reading activities (Kong & Pearson, 2003). Over the school year, 'student conversations became more expert-like and focused as students learned to ask each other questions and to share their thoughts on topics of mutual interest. Their conversation shifted from focusing on factual information to fundamental questions of human existence as they learned to engage in critical and reflective talk about texts. Students also learned to appreciate

literacy texts and began to enjoy conversing with each other' (Kong & Pearson, 2003).

Enjoyment of shared reading does not, of course, happen only in school classrooms. Older students, like beginning readers, can share reading with adults. Popular books, such as J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books, can be just as engrossing when read aloud as when read independently. Sometimes, when an adult reads part of a long book like the *Harry Potter* books, the listener engages with the story, and continues reading independently.

Enjoyment of popular texts can lead to engagement with other texts. The *Shrek* movies draw on a range of cultural knowledge. Access to this knowledge extends understanding of the many-layered connections between the contemporary movie and a range of traditional stories. If a viewer of *Shrek* already knows Grimm's fairy tales, they have access to different understandings than a viewer who has not encountered these tales. Reading and talking about Grimm's stories after seeing the movie enriches appreciation of the ironies of Princess Fiona's situation.

The research evidence suggests that, at home or at school, conversations about books, shared reading of books, and connecting everyday experiences with reading are valued activities that help students to become engaged in reading and contribute to the enhancement of future learning. ■

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Research Conference 2004: Supporting student wellbeing



Professor Judith Harackiewicz of the University of Wisconsin delivers her keynote address

More than 500 researchers, policy makers and teachers from a broad range of educational contexts from Australia and overseas met in Adelaide in October to examine effective ways of supporting student wellbeing at ACER's ninth annual Research Conference.

The conference looked at five interrelated areas of student wellbeing: mental, emotional, spiritual, physical and social.

Among the keynote speakers was Professor Judith Harackiewicz, Professor of Psychology at the University of Wisconsin, who reported on an investigation into the importance of students' goals and interests in motivating their involvement in education. Other keynote speakers were Dr Michael Sawyer, a professor of Adolescent Psychology who reviewed the results of a national survey conducted to identify and understand mental health problems among Australian children and adolescents; Dr Michael Carr-Gregg who examined the state of Australian parenting in 2004; and Emeritus Professor Brian Hill of Murdoch

University who explored the role of values in wellbeing.

Proceedings from the conference are available from the ACER website at www.acer.edu.au/workshops/documents/proceedings.pdf

LSAY Easy Reference Guide

A new resource will enable easier access to information about the experiences of Australian youth as they move through secondary school, into further education or training, and into the labour market and adult life.

An Easy Reference Guide to Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Reports, 1996–2003, by Robyn Penman, thematically summarises the 36 research reports published during those years.

The *Easy Reference Guide* outlines what has been learned about the experiences of Australian youth as they make transitions from school to the workforce or further education and training. The capacity to follow the same young people over time means that factors influencing their pathways and outcomes can be identified and changes in the educational and employment experiences of successive generations can be tracked.

An Easy Reference Guide to Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Reports, 1996–2003, by Robyn Penman, is available in print from ACER Press (Phone 03 9835 7447, email sales@acer.edu.au for \$40.00) or can be downloaded from the ACER website, www.acer.edu.au

National civics and citizenship assessment



ACER has been contracted by the Performance Measurement and Reporting Taskforce of MCEETYA to conduct the assessments and prepare a report on the National Year 6 and Year 10 Civics and Citizenship Sample Assessment.

The assessment took place in October involving a random sample of Year 6 and Year 10 students from approximately 600 schools across Australia. Students completed a written assessment that examined civic knowledge and understanding and the skills and values needed for active citizenship. ACER administered the test and will analyse the data and prepare the national report, which will provide analysis of nationally comparative state and territory data and overall trends. Schools involved in the study will receive student reports in December this year while ACER will prepare a full report to MCEETYA by May 2005.

This assessment of civics and citizenship is part of a national plan that is progressively being put in place to monitor and report on student achievement against the *National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century*.

Further information can be found on the MCEETYA website at

www.mceetya.edu.au/taskfrce/civics.htm

ACER signs multi-million-dollar UAE test development contract



ACER's Research Director, System and School Testing, Professor Jim Tognolini signs the contract with the UAE Minister for Education and Youth, H.E. Dr. Ali Abdul Aziz Al Sharhan

ACER has entered into a multi-million-dollar agreement to develop aptitude testing for higher education selection in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). A Memorandum of Understanding between ACER and the UAE Ministry of Education and Youth was officially signed in Dubai in July and work began on the project in September. The first administration of the new test will take place in 2008.

ACER's chief executive Professor Geoff Masters said the project involves staff from ACER working collaboratively with the Ministry to develop a new approach to university selection for the UAE.

'It will build on ACER's considerable experience in the development of aptitude and selection testing programs,' he said, adding that ACER had faced major competition from much larger US companies for the contract. The contract is ACER's second in the UAE. ACER is also working with the UAE Ministry's Centre for Educational Measurement and Evaluation (CETME) for the development and implementation of the National Assessment of Student

Achievement and Progress (NASAP). Work recently commenced on a contract for the second cycle of NASAP.

International assessment programs

ACER will release the results of two major international assessment projects in December. The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a three-year survey of the knowledge and skills of 15-year-olds in the principal industrialised countries. PISA assesses literacy in reading, mathematics and science.

ACER leads the consortium conducting the international study for the OECD and is conducting the Australian national component of PISA. Reports on the international and national components of PISA 2003 are due for release on 7 December.

International and Australian national reports on results of the latest phase of testing in the Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS Trends) are due for release on 14 December. TIMSS is a large international study designed to measure trends in students' knowledge and abilities in mathematics and science and to investigate the cultural environments, teaching practices, curriculum goals and institutional arrangements that are associated with achievement.

The results from both PISA and TIMSS will be posted on ACER's website as soon as they are available. The findings will also feature in the next edition of *Research Developments*.

Workload in New Zealand secondary schools

The New Zealand Ministry of Education has contracted ACER to investigate the nature and patterns of workload in secondary schools and explore practical and innovative ways to manage workload more effectively in the future. Twenty case studies of schools have been completed, and all secondary and area schools in New Zealand are being sent surveys – to the principal, senior and middle managers and teachers. The work is being undertaken with the help of the NZCER and the final report will be available in the near future.

Rowe joins Carrick Institute board



ACER Research Director, Learning Processes and Contexts, Dr Ken Rowe has been appointed as a Director of the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. Dr Rowe was an invited attendee at the official launch of the Carrick Institute at Parliament House, Canberra, in August. Further information about the Carrick Institute and Board is available on its website at www.autc.gov.au/institute.htm

Assessment program launched in India



Jim Tognolini presented information on using the globalAchieve test to a group of Indian educators in New Delhi in July.

ACER launched its newest assessment initiative, *globalAchieve*, in India in October.

The *globalAchieve* program consists of pencil and paper tests for students in classes 3-10 in English and mathematics. The tests are based on ACER's international research work and are designed to measure a student's performance in the generic skills that underpin the teaching of English and mathematics across the globe.

'ACER is committed to ensuring that all assessment is linked integrally to ongoing student learning,' said Research Director, Systems and School Testing, Professor Jim Tognolini.

'*globalAchieve* includes all of the components necessary to incorporate assessment into classroom learning.'

All questions in the system assess generic skills identified by universities as necessary for success in tertiary studies. The questions have also been designed to be engaging for all students and challenging for the most able students.

Thirteen schools from New Delhi participated in a research project with ACER in April 2004 to validate the

globalAchieve tests for use in Indian schools. Participating schools were provided with detailed feedback regarding the performance of their students and the suitability of the tests for use in Indian schools.

A detailed description of the *globalAchieve* system and additional information is available through the *globalAchieve* website www.globalAchieve.com

Evaluation of the Access to Excellence initiative.

ACER has been awarded a new contract with the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DE&T) to evaluate the *Access to Excellence* Initiative. This is one of four major initiatives within the DE&T *Innovation and Excellence in the Middle Years* program. The evaluation will examine the effectiveness of the *Access to Excellence* model in improving the literacy and numeracy achievement levels and the attendance and retention rates of middle years students in schools participating in the initiative.

Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test

ACER has signed an agreement with the Education Quality and Accountability Office of Ontario to develop reading and writing assessment material for the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT). The OSSLT is a test of reading and writing that all Ontario students sit in Grade 10. Successful completion of the OSSLT is one of the requirements for an Ontario Secondary School Diploma. ACER has been

commissioned to develop a battery of reading and writing assessment tasks to trial-test stage, some of which were piloted in October.

International Test Users Conference



Keynote speaker Thomas Achenbach addresses the conference

World leaders in the assessment of intelligence, emotions and behaviour gathered in Melbourne in July to consider issues in assessing the whole person across the lifespan. They joined around 180 delegates including participants from the United States, Malaysia, Indonesia and New Zealand taking part in the International Test Users' Conference 2004 hosted by ACER. Keynote presentations were given by Professor Gale Roid, co-author of the Stanford Binet 5; Professor Thomas Achenbach, author of the Child Behaviour Checklist; Dr David Caruso, co-author of the Mayar, Salovey, Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test; and Dr Katherine Hirsch, co-author of a number of texts on the Myers Briggs Type Indicator. Proceedings from the conference can be downloaded from the ACER website at

www.acer.edu.au/workshops/conferences.html



Improving Learning

ACER school-based surveys

Attitudes and Values Questionnaire

School Life Questionnaire

Social-Emotional Well-Being Survey

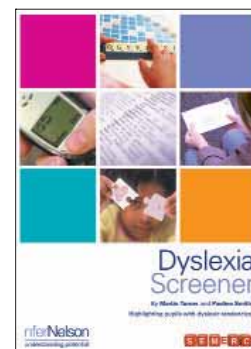
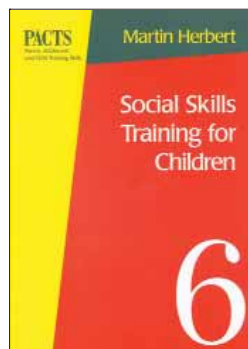
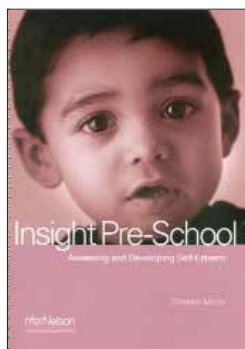
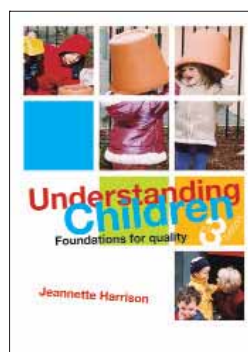
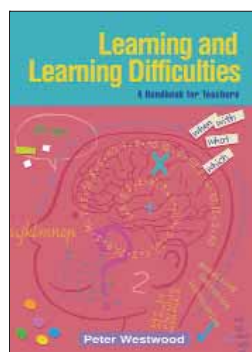
Schools are able to assess

- students' perceptions of their school, teachers and sense of self in their school
- social, cultural and spiritual attitudes and values
- quality of school life experienced by students
- emotional well-being and social-emotional-motivational competencies of students
- attitudes and behaviour in a non-academic context

The surveys

- ask respondents to indicate their level of agreement with a series of statements presented in user-friendly language
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